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Lindsay Macumber

Saint Mary's University, lindsay.macumber@smu.ca

Magi Abdul-Masih

Saint Mary's University, magi.abdul-masih@smu.ca

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A Journey into the Heart of God: Darren Aronofsky's Noah (2014) as a subversive Kabbalistic Text

Abstract

The title of this paper reflects our interpretation of this film as a subversive mystical text, from within the Jewish tradition of Kabbalah. This interpretation is itself the product of a long journey of thinking about, and wrestling with this film in various ways. In this paper, we will outline this journey, concentrating on our first impressions of the film, some notable shifts in our thinking on this film that alerted us to the connection between the film and Jewish mysticism, and some concluding remarks about the implications of this reading.

Keywords

Kabbalah, Mysticism, Noah

Author Notes

Lindsay Macumber is an adjunct professor at Saint Mary's University. She completed her PhD at the University of Toronto. Her dissertation focused on Hannah Arendt's representation of the Holocaust. You can reach her at Lindsay.macumber@smu.ca. Magi Abdul-Masih is an Associate Professor at Saint Mary's University. She completed her PhD at the Toronto School of Theology. Her research focuses on liberation theology and Israel/ Palestine. You can reach her at magi.abdul-masih@smu.ca.

First Impressions of the film

Much has already been written about the various and varied public and academic responses to this film. Although Aronofsky explicitly indicated that *Noah* was “the least biblical film ever made,”¹ many argued that it skewed the biblical story² by adding things like giant “rock monsters,”³ (the Nephilim- referred to in the film as “the fallen”),⁴ the character of Ila (played by Emma Watson), and, perhaps most importantly, the fact that Noah turns into a “homicidal maniac” who decides humanity is meant to perish and refuses to allow his sons to bring wives onto the ark.⁴

Although we saw this film before many of these critiques emerged, we shared a first impression of the film that was overwhelmingly positive. We saw in the film a representation of the biblical story that was full of violence, destruction, and death. We agreed that this is an important corrective to the “watered down” version that has dominated much of popular culture and consciousness, where the story has become a favorite in children’s literature and toys (both Fisher Price and Playmobil make “Noah’s Ark” playsets), even though the story of Noah is among the most horrific in scripture. Aronofsky perfectly encapsulates this horror when Noah’s family begs him to let more people on board the ark. Though the waters around them continue to rise, and the screams of the dying fill the air, Noah refuses.

It was therefore not the many changes and additions to the story that we, unlike many others, initially responded to, but the representation of the story as one of violence and destruction. Coming to the film with the knowledge that Aronofsky, though raised Jewish, claims to be athiest,⁴ we saw the changes as a different take on the story from within the interpretative tradition of Midrash, with which he would be familiar. This

tradition of interpreting the stories of Torah (or the larger collection it finds itself within, the Tanak, the primary Jewish scripture), began with the Rabbis around 600 CE.⁵ However, it has expanded far beyond rabbinical circles, and been used as a tool for exegetes looking to open these stories up in order to answer questions they pose, give voice to perspectives they silence or omit (especially women),⁶ and address contradictions in the text. Thus, this interpretive exercise has always been characterized by taking liberties and being creative with the text, and additions and changes to the story itself, even to the point that it could only be described as “based on” the original story, are not uncommon. We therefore understood this as one of many *midrashim* (plural of *midrash*) that opens up the story in new and exciting ways, and saw these many changes and additions as characteristic for such exercises.⁷

Another aspect of the film that fascinated us, both initially and increasingly as we continued to think about the film, was the process through which Noah received and interpreted his revelations and experiences of God throughout the film. Unlike in Torah, where Noah is told, quite unambiguously, what is going to happen (the destruction of “all flesh” brought about by “waters upon the earth- to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life”), why (“all flesh had corrupted the earth”), what he is to do (build an ark of gopher wood, for which specific instructions are provided, and bring on board his family, as well as seven pairs of each clean animal and two pairs of each unclean animal) (Genesis 6:9-7:3); in the film, Noah does not receive a single definitive revelation with clear instruction, but instead, bits and pieces of information from various experiences of God, sometimes in dreams, sometimes in visions.

His journey throughout the film is one of attempting to interpret these visions, and, much like the journey we embarked on in thinking about this film, it is full of twists, surprises, and mistaken turns. However, what truly unites our journey of interpretation with Noah's, is our retrospective realization that we, like many of the film's critics, and Noah himself, started out on the wrong foot. In focusing on the violent representation of the story, as well as on the changes and additions to the story, we were responding the story as it appeared on the screen. What we have come to realize, however, is that another possible meaning of this film is hidden behind the surface (the literal reading or representation of the story). Like all mystical texts, it invites us to look deeper, to embark on a journey of interpretation that takes us *behind* the story. For us, this was a journey into the mystical tradition of Kabbalah, for Noah, it was a journey into the heart of God.

Shift in Focus: A Mystical Turn

Following our initial positive response to the representation of the story as one of violence and destruction, our next step in this journey, and the one that alerted us to the role of mysticism in the text, was a commentary on the film by theologian Brian Mattson. On his public blog post, Mattson berates the religious leadership for not recognizing the blatant gnostic elements in the movie. Taking his clues and negative judgment from Irenaeus of Lyon's "Against Heresies," Mattson argues that the world of Aronofsky's Noah is a thoroughly gnostic one.⁸ Taking his lead, we began to examine different branches of Gnosticism, and discovered a potential connection with the Sethian Gnostic worldview.

We were initially optimistic about this path, since it seemed to answer a question we had of the film, which was why Noah and his family were identified as the descendants

of Seth, and everyone else was identified as the descendants of Cain. The Sethians were a group of Gnostics who lived between 100 BCE - 200 CE. Very little was known about them until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library. Before then, all knowledge of this group came from the text Mattson cites, Irenaeus' "Against heresies," which constructs Gnosticism as a heresy.⁹

Looking at the Sethian creation myth, there were some elements that helped us think about particular aspects of the film in new ways. In this creation myth, which diverts considerably from the Genesis account, the Creator God (the name given to God by everyone in the film), exists within a monistic system, which includes more than one divine emanation. This Creator God, however is not the supreme God, or highest emanation (which is unknowable), but is in fact born from Sophia, who disobeyed the supreme God and procreated independently (without relying on the other emanations). As a result, the supreme God and all other emanations withdrew from the Creator God, who then created human beings. In an attempt to correct her mistake, Sophia appears as a serpent in the Garden of Eden, attempting to bring to human beings the knowledge that their Creator is not in fact the highest God. As descendants of Sophia, human beings retain a spark of the true, Supreme God. The act of disobedience of Adam and Eve in the garden is thus the first act of liberation of human beings from the power of the creator God.¹⁰

When we returned to the film with this worldview in mind, however, several aspects of the story did not support this Sethian interpretation. Perhaps the most striking is that there is no indication in the film, either by Noah or any other characters, of the existence of any God other than the Creator. In addition, when Noah tells the story of Creation to his family, Adam and Eve are represented as beings of pure light. In the Sethian myth, they

are created with material bodies, and these bodies essentially represent their enslavement to the material world and Creator God (and separation from the higher divine emanations). We therefore concluded that the Sethian gnostic worldview was not supported by the film.

Gnosticism is not, however, the only worldview that Mattson takes up in his interpretation of the film. He also discusses Kabbalah, and in fact, provides a much stronger case for the argument that the film should be read from within this interpretive lens. It also seemed to us that Mattson moves quite easily and swiftly between Gnosticism and Kaballah, which are two highly complex and differentiated worldviews. Our suspicions in this regard were confirmed by a response to Mattson's post by Peter T. Chattaway, who charges that Mattson conflates Gnosticism and Kabbalah.¹¹ Although Mattson responded to this charge in a video, claiming that he clearly differentiated, and therefore did not conflate these two worldviews,¹² Chattaway provides some additional indications that the film should not, in fact, be read from within the Gnostic framework.

First, and importantly, as we have mentioned, Gnosticism sees human beings, and creation itself, as the product of, if not an evil deity, at least a disobedient and arrogant one. Thus, with the help of Sophia, the "goal is to escape from the material into the eternal."¹³ In the film, as in the Zohar (Kabbalah's primary text), creation itself is celebrated (for reasons made apparent in our following section). Noah is meant to save the animals because they are "innocent;" following the flood, the divine command "be fruitful and multiply" is repeated, this time by Noah, and, as picked up by reviewers who focus on the deep ecology apparent in the film,¹⁴ there is a focus on the care for and protection of creatures and the world. Chattaway also indicates not only that Aronofsky has been inspired by Kabbalah in other films, such as *Pi* (1998), but that he has explicitly stated to have based the film on

extra biblical *Jewish* sources, “including the Zohar.”¹⁵ Based on our own failed attempt to find Gnostic elements in the film, and Chattaway’s convincing critique, we concluded that our sojourn into Gnosticism was a mistaken, but necessary, turn on our journey of interpretation. We therefore shifted our attention exclusively towards Kabbalah, and this is when we found various clues, some highlighted by Mattson and Chattaway, and some new and surprising, which confirmed that this was where the film should best be read and situated.

Aronofsky’s film as a Kabbalistic Midrash

In order to contextualize this interpretation, it’s important to understand the relationship between Torah and the Zohar, which was composed around 1280 in Spain.¹⁶ While the Tanak is granted authority within Kabbalah, the Zohar becomes the interpretive lens through which it is viewed. Essentially, the Zohar becomes the interpretive key through which the stories of Torah (including Noah) are read in order to discover their hidden meaning. This meaning is none other than the true nature of the divine, which Kabbalists claim is revealed in and through Torah, which “encodes the inner life of the divine.”¹⁷ The Zohar thus becomes the esoteric key that unlocks the divine self-disclosure hidden in the Torah, allowing us to see beyond the surface of its stories, beyond even their metaphorical interpretation, to the inner life of God they reveal.¹⁸ In a similar way, seeing this film as a mystical text, allows it, like the Zohar, to become the interpretive key that allows us to see beyond the surface of the story of Noah that Aronofsky presents.

In fact, one of the most explicit aspects of the film, and a recurrent theme throughout, as pointed out by Mattson, seems to support this interpretation. The events of

this film cover a lot of ground and many years, however, throughout the entire film, all the characters are united in a search for something that they cannot find: a rock that is called Zohar. As indicated by several of the men in the film, this rock was once plentiful. However, the many mines that riddle the landscapes of the film have long since run dry. Neither the “men” (descendants of Cain), or Noah and his family (who are identified as the “descendants of Seth”), are therefore able to get their hands on this important resource.

Interestingly, the word Zohar means radiance or illumination (which also alludes to its relationship with Torah, since it provides “illumination” for the stories within). This etymology is picked up in the film, since whenever this rock is struck, it brings forth both light and fire. Thus, it is the source not only of illumination, but also, in a way, of life. If the Zohar in the film is fulfilling a similar function as the Zohar within Kabbalah, then it can be surmised that having Zohar is what allows the characters in the film (and perhaps also us, as viewers) to be able to see what is happening to and around them (essentially, the story itself), clearly. The lack of Zohar is therefore a problem, which is clearly evident by the desperate search that everyone in the film seems to be on to find it. While this condition of lacking the Zohar is common among all the film’s characters, it becomes especially important for Noah. Because he (like everyone else) lacks this source of illumination, he essentially starts off on the wrong foot in his own journey of interpreting his divinely ordained mission. Even though the Creator communicates with Noah through dreams and visions, it is our claim that part of the reason he is unable to correctly, or completely, interpret these is because he is missing this illuminating, interpretive key.

Beyond the importance of the Zohar in the film, another explicit clue that the film could be read as a Kabalistic text, and also that Noah begins his journey of interpretation

on the wrong foot, is the use of the second explicit symbol that permeates the film, the snake, or serpent, and the snakeskin relic. This symbol appears as part of a sequence of symbols in nearly every revelation that Noah has in the film. In (almost) every case, a very brief instance of the snake slithering on the ground is followed by a piece of fruit (possibly a pomegranate) being grasped by a human hand, and then a man killing another (alluding to the first murder of Abel by his brother Cain). This sequence seems to interpret the serpent as a symbol of evil, of temptation away from goodness, and of disobedience to, and separation from, God. In this commonly cited narrative, the snake tempts Eve to disobey God and eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, she yields to temptation, and, as a consequence, evil, death, and eventually murder, enter into the created world. However, there are several indicators that this is not the role the snake is playing in the film.

As noted by Mattson, but missed by many initial reviewers, the film is also based around a sacred birthright that is passed on through ritualistic use of a snakeskin relic. In the opening scene of the film, we see a young Noah sitting with his father, Lamech. His father tells him that, as the final descendent of Seth, it is his job to be the protector of creation. In order to bestow this birthright onto his son, he wraps a snake's skin around his arm. As he does so, the skin becomes luminous, indicating that there is not only ritual importance attached the snake's skin, but also that it bestows some power or wisdom on the recipient of this birthright, in and through the ritual use of this relic.¹⁹

Whatever this ritual was meant to bestow, because it is interrupted, it does not seem that Noah receives its power. Just as Lamech is about to touch Noah's outstretched finger with the luminous relic, a group of men led by Tubal Cain approach, and Lamech is torn

away from his son to defend them both, before he is able to touch Noah's hand with the relic. While in hiding, Noah watches as Tubal Cain kills his father, and takes the relic for himself. Although Tubal Cain wears this relic for most of the film from this point on, it never becomes luminous, indicating it does not fulfill its ritual purpose while in his possession.

As a result of this altercation not only is Noah left fatherless, but, perhaps more importantly, he has not received the sacred birthright, and whatever this is meant to have bestowed upon him. Thus, much like the elusive Zohar, Noah is missing something that seems quite essential. This should not concern us if we continue to understand the snake as representative of evil and temptation. What good could possibly come from ritualistic use of a symbol for disobedience, evil, and death? However, this ritual use of the snakeskin indicates that there is something more happening in the film, and something that, once again, needs to be seen from within the mystical tradition of Kabbalah.

Within Jewish mysticism, there is no external force outside of God that could be understood as working against God (a point we will illustrate further in the following section). Thus, the common understanding of the snake as representative of temptation or evil, a force other than and adversarial to God, makes no sense from within this framework. In fact, even taking a close look at the role the serpent plays in the Book of Genesis itself, hints that this common interpretation of the serpent may be a bit misguided. The serpent, after all, exists within the Garden of Eden. It seems odd that an adversarial creature would exist in or be able to make its way into paradise. In addition, even if the serpent is the "shrewdest of all the wild beasts that the Lord God made" (Genesis 3:1), it is still, like everything and everyone else, created by God (in fact, on the same day as human beings,

Genesis 1:24). As a creature in the Garden of Eden, created by God, it makes little sense to interpret the snake as opposed to God, or representative of any other antagonistic or dualistic force. In addition, the snake is acting in the story not as the bringer of death and evil, but as the bringer of knowledge. After all, what the snake is tempting Eve with is the *knowledge* that will result from eating the fruit from the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil. It is therefore the source not of evil and death, but of *knowledge* and *wisdom*. In Genesis, the serpent brings a wisdom that is divine, since it was not meant to be shared with human beings, the knowledge of good and evil.²⁰ When understood in this light, it is therefore this knowledge and wisdom that Noah lacks, since he does not receive the sacred birthright from the luminous relic. Coupled with the fact that he is missing the Zohar, Noah truly begins his mission of receiving and interpreting God's revelations on the wrong foot. With all of these things working against him, it seems like Noah may be doomed to fail from the start.

This fatalistic interpretation of Noah's mission seems to be supported by the overall darkness of the film, both in terms of its content and also its cinematography. Watching the film in class with students, there are several scenes that are barely visible at all because of the dark hues worn by all the characters,²¹ and the lack of light (which, again, may be an allusion to the lack of Zohar, or illumination). Despite this darkness, there is one aspect of the film that redeems it, so to speak, and brings some light to the overall tone and content of the film. The relationships that Noah shares with his family members, at least for the first part of the film, provide this light, and, as we argue, also provide the human (and divine) community through which Noah is meant to interpret and respond to his revelations.

One of the most striking aspects of this film, when compared with the Genesis account, is the depth of character that is given to each of his family members. Torah tells us nothing of Noah's sons, other than their names and the fact that they bring wives on board the ark. We learn even less about Noah's wife, who is not even named in the text, and counts as one of Torah's many nameless and faceless women. When considering the nature of the story of Noah, these omissions are especially interesting, since you might imagine the close family of a man trusted with saving a select few of God's creatures while the rest perish, might have something to say about all of this.

The film fills in some of these gaps, and gives us a glimpse into the *inner lives* of Noah's sons, particularly Shem and Ham, his wife, and a new character, Ila.²² We learn very early on that Ham is full of questions. He asks his father why he can't pick flowers, why men hunt and eat animals, why he can't bring a wife on board the ark, etc. Essentially, whenever Ham is told that things are to be a certain way, he seeks additional information, unable to accept anything without fully understanding the reasons it is so. Although Shem is less developed, (though becomes a more central character, as we argue subsequently), we get a sense of his love for Ila, and his commitment to his mother, wife, and children. We watch Ila, who does not appear in Genesis, but is taken in by the family early on in the film, grow in her relationship with Shem, whom she loves so desperately that she begs Noah to find him a wife that can bear children to take on board the ark. Even Noah's wife, Naameh,²³ becomes a multi-dimensional character, who trusts in and loves her husband, but who is primarily moved and motivated by her love for, and commitment to, her children.

One of the primary ways through which we learn about Noah is through his relationships with his family members. For the first half of the film, these relationships are strong, tender, and seem to be based on mutual love and respect. Although the patriarch of the family, Noah is not domineering. He shows kindness, patience, and compassion towards his family members, and appears to be a loving father and husband. He responds with patience to Ham's persistent questioning, always taking the time to explain why things are the way they are (even if it simply because the Creator wills it). Even though Ila is badly injured when they find her, he does not hesitate to bring her with them, even though they are on the run from a mob of angry men. When her survival is uncertain, Noah comforts the strange child, singing her a song (about mercy), that his father sang to him as a child, showing her kindness and welcoming her into the family as one of his own children, even while the fate of his family is uncertain. This tenderness continues to characterize their relationship, as Noah reassures Ila of Shem's love and of her worthiness, despite the fact that her injuries render her unable to conceive.

Noah's relationship with his wife, Naameh, who is named in the credits but not in the film, also seems quite loving and characterized by a (perhaps) surprising level of dependence (on Naameh, by Noah). When returning from his daily ventures with his sons, Noah communicates all of his concerns to his wife. One could even say that Naameh becomes Noah's main confidant. When he begins to receive his revelations, he shares them with her in order to benefit from her guidance and help him in his journey of interpretation. Although it is certainly true that Naameh does not always understand, or agree with, Noah's interpretation of his mission, we do not understand her (initial) support of Noah to be a

sign of her passivity in this relationship, but rather one of her trust in her husband, which is a reflection of the strength of their relationship.

Beyond his immediate family, Noah also shares a close relationship with his grandfather, Methuselah, who becomes quite instrumental in the film. After seeing the mountain on which his grandfather dwells in a dream, Noah and Shem go to find the old man, and seek his guidance on what his revelations mean, and how he is meant to respond to them. When they arrive, Methuselah gives Noah a cup of tea that puts him in a trance like state and initiates another vision. After Noah emerges from this state, Methuselah talks with Noah about what he saw, and gives him a seed from Eden to plant, which grows into the forest he uses to build the ark.

Noah's compassion as a father, his partnership with his wife, and his trust in his grandfather, make clear that for most of the film, Noah's journey to interpret his visions is a collaborative one. Although it is he alone who receives the revelations, he interprets them in dialogue with his family members and within the nexus of these relationships. Thus, Ham, Shem, Ila, Naameh, and Methuselah are all involved in his journey of interpretation. There comes a point in the film, however, where this collaboration, and where the love and respect that characterized these relationships, dramatically ends.

This occurs as a result of another revelatory vision that Noah has. This time, the vision occurs amidst one of the most horrific scenes of the film, when Noah goes into the village where Tubal Cain is preparing his forces to storm the ark when the deluge comes. Since this scene occurs immediately after Ila asks Noah to find Shem a wife when he goes to find wives for Ham and Japheth, it would seem that this is why Noah has made his way here. When he arrives, he witnesses groups of savage men dragging women by their hair,

placing them in cages, and selling them. He sees animals being slaughtered and eaten. This is particularly notable since it has already been made clear that Noah and his family do not kill or eat animals. Most striking, however, is an unmistakably symbolic moment in which a lamb is thrown up into the air and torn limb from limb when it falls into a hostile mob waiting on the ground.

As he observes this harrowing scene, Noah notices a man scurry away with a piece of the lamb's body. His eyes follow this man into a dark corner. Just before the man gorges himself on the raw flesh, he turns around to face Noah. What Noah sees, however, is not another man, but his very own face, which then contorts into a serpent-like, black eyed, demonic visage. This is followed by a vision similar to those we have seen before. The by now familiar sequence of snake, fruit, kill, occurs. However, this time, the snake, which has appeared as green in every vision up until this point, sheds its skin and becomes black.

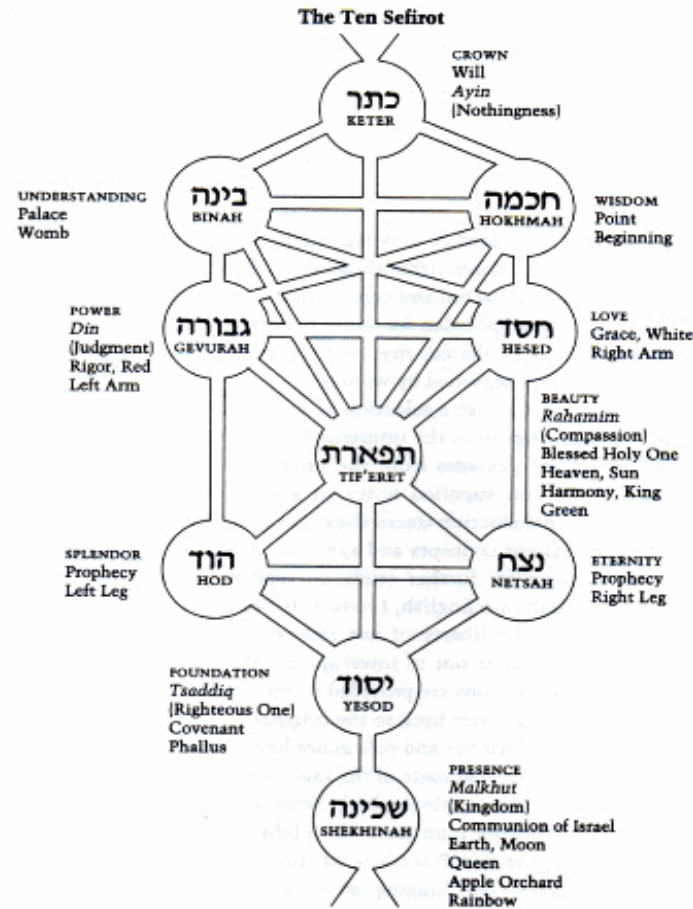
Following this traumatic experience and vision, we see Noah sitting alone. He has run from the village and is contemplating what he has seen, trying to interpret his latest vision. It is at this point that he becomes convinced that his mission is not to oversee the survival of the animals and his family, but instead to ensure both the survival of the animals and the end of humanity, since wickedness is also in them, and especially, as this scene demonstrates, in him.

From this point on everything about Noah changes. This is made brilliantly apparent in the scene that follows, when Noah returns to his family. The ominous music in the background, and even the way that Noah walks when shot from behind, make it clear that something (or everything) about him has changed. When Ham, towards whom Noah has always demonstrated patience, approaches him to ask where the wives are, Noah

refuses to answer his questions and pushes him to the ground. He does not speak to Ila or Shem, and shows no response when Ham storms off, offended and upset by their altercation. He displays callousness towards Naameh, brushing past her with his shoulder, refusing her companionship and council, and going into the ark to be alone.

This isolation is the most important characteristic of Noah from this point on. The relationships that once defined him and his livelihood are no more, as Noah closes himself off completely to his family members. He ceases to seek their advice, physically isolates himself from them, and is prepared to put their lives at risk should they stand in the way of what he has now concluded to be his divinely ordained mission.

What has really occurred at this point, however, is not only that Noah has made up his mind about his mission and cut himself off from his family members and from their guidance in interpreting his visions, but that he has cut himself off from the fullness of God, and doomed his interpretation of his mission to failure. The reason for this is that we believe each of Noah's family members, like the serpent (who we argue represents divine wisdom), also represent aspects of the divine. In fact, within the Zohar, there are ten such aspects, each of which has a particular place within the ein-sof, the infinite, the system of divine emanations that is the cornerstone of the Kabbalistic theology.



Our Journey into the Heart of God

Within this system, God's presence and creative activity in the world are the result of a process whereby divine energy is embodied in a series of emanations, each of which represent a different aspect of God, including understanding, wisdom, judgment, beauty, and mercy. Throughout this process, as demonstrated by the perfectly symmetrical sefirot system, or Ein Sof (the Infinite), balance is key. In order for God's presence, or Shekinah, to be manifest in creation, the sefirot on each side of the system must balance one another out. This balance must be achieved between each pair of sefirot that appear opposite one another in the system, and is ultimately the balance not only of divine attributes, but also of feminine and masculine divine power. Thus, understanding (feminine) must be

accompanied by wisdom (masculine), judgment (feminine) must be tempered by mercy (masculine), and splendor (feminine) and victory (masculine), the two sides of prophecy, must be present. When this balance is achieved, the sefirot that appear in the center of the system, Tiferet (beauty, which is masculine), and Yesod (foundation, which is masculine), the phallus and foundation of god's creative work, can bring forth God's presence, or Shekinah (feminine), in the created world.²⁴

Although there are many aspects of this theology that differentiate it from traditional Judaism, what is most notable is the fact that we, as human beings, are Shekinah. As one of God's creations, we embody divine essence. In Kabbalah, this is what allows us to benefit from the esoteric texts and teachings in order to also embody higher sefirot within the Ein Sof system. It is our claim that in the film, however, it is not only Shekinah that the characters embody and represent. Rather, each of Noah's family members embodies a different aspect of the divine within this system. Just as God cannot be reduced to any one attribute or emanation in this system, but "is the interaction of these ten sefirot,"²⁵ his family forms the nexus through which Noah is meant to interpret and respond to his revelations.

The only sefirot not embodied in the film is Keter, or crown. This is not surprising, since this is the highest of the sefirot and essentially represents nothingness. It is the beginning of the creative process, the idea of creation, which needs to pass through all of the subsequent manifestations of the divine personality to be realized in Shekinah. Beyond the Crown (or Keter) we have our first pair of sefirot, Binah (understanding), and Hochmah (wisdom).²⁶ Already at this stage, however, we have imbalance. Ham, who never ceases questioning and asking why, (i.e., why he can't pick the flowers, why people kill and eat

animals, why he can't seek power using violence), embodies understanding. But his search for understanding is not balanced by wisdom, which is represented, as previously indicated, by the serpent. Because he, (like Noah, and the rest of the family), lacks the knowledge the ritualistic use of the snake's skin would have bestowed upon them, Ham lacks the wisdom required to temper his incessant search for understanding.

Din (judgment) and Hesed (mercy, or love), perhaps not surprisingly, are embodied by Noah and Naameh, respectively. This becomes abundantly clear in the scene that follows Noah's return to his family after his horrific experience in the village. After Noah brushes past Naameh and enters the ark alone, she goes in to talk to him, and attempt to understand this new change in him. At this point, Noah reveals to her that he has interpreted his mission as being the extinction of humanity. As a loving and protective mother, Naameh is unable to accept that her sons are doomed to die childless. She argues that they are "good men" who would "make good fathers," citing their most positive characteristics, "Shem's loyalty, Japheth's kindness, Ham's integrity." As the embodiment of divine mercy and love, Naameh sees only the goodness in her sons, and cannot accept this fate for them, even if Noah claims it is divinely ordained.

In response, Noah, here the prototypical judgmental father, lists his son's faults and shortcomings, "Shem is blinded by desire, Ham is covetous, Japheth lives only to please." He then compels Naameh to agree that they would both do anything to protect their children, including kill. Thus, he says, "We're no different. We were weak and we were selfish to think that we could set ourselves apart." When Noah insists that they will "complete the work, and then die like everyone else," Naameh desperately screams, "They are children, they are our children, have you no *mercy*?" In his reply, "the time for mercy

is past, now our punishment begins,” Noah perfectly exemplifies his embodiment of divine judgment, closed off from his wife’s, or divine, mercy, which is denied the chance to temper divine judgment (55:55-1:00:30).

The imbalance between these two sefirot is particularly troubling, since the result of divine judgment being untempered by divine mercy is the emergence of evil into the world. As previously indicated, kabbalah does not understand evil to be an external or dualistic force, since nothing exists outside of God and God’s creative activity within the Ein Sof. Instead, it results from the imbalance between these two sefirot, when “divine judgment is not softened by love, it lashes out to destroy life. Here lies the origin of evil, called Sitra Ahra, the Other Side.”²⁷ Essentially, evil results when there is a “clog” in the sefirot system, when divine “energy does not flow as it should” between these two important emanations of judgment and mercy.²⁸ Thus, when Noah closes himself off to his wife, and to her mercy, as well as God’s, his mission is doomed to failure, because of the imbalance created and the evil this imbalance allows.

Naameh is not, however, the only one of his loved one’s he closes himself off to. From this point on in the film, Noah also isolates himself from all of the family members he once shared a loving and collaborative relationship with. Once Noah becomes convinced his mission is the extinction of human life, he closes himself off to his wife’s unrestrained and unconditional love, to Ham’s questioning, and to everything else, and embodies only divine judgment. Noah’s final interpretation of his revelatory visions marks the end of his relationship with his family. However, it does not mark the end of their role in the story.

When Naameh realizes she cannot get through to Noah and interrupt his judgment with her mercy, she takes matters into her own hands and seeks out Methuselah. Since

Methuselah lives in the mountain and also helped Noah experience God (by providing him with the tea that brought about a vision), it is clear that he represents the prophetic sefirot, Hod (Splendor) and Netsah (Victory), which are God's action in the world. When Naameh finds Methuselah, he is hesitant to help. He stresses Noah's agency, indicating that any intervention on his behalf could only bring about "pain and possibly tragedy," since the choice would ultimately be in Noah's hands once again (1:03:10). What this scene demonstrates is the dynamic between the two prophetic sefirot, splendor and victory, which struggle to make just enough, but never more of God's work and action, manifest in creation than it can handle. After all, creation, and creatures, as finite, limited beings, can only handle so much of God's essence and intervention if they are to survive as independent beings. Despite his hesitation, Methuselah is moved by Naameh's love for her sons, her longing for their future, and her plea that "all they desire is love, isn't that all their hearts need to be good?" (1:02:38).

His intervention occurs in a breathtaking scene where Ila finds him in the forest while looking for Ham (who has run away after his altercation with Noah). He offers to give her his blessing, as her great grandfather, since she has already been a member of his family for ten years. He then touches her stomach. This gesture is followed by a stunning scene in which she sees the wind (representative of the spirit of God), blowing in the trees and being manifest in the world. It is clear that something has changed in Ila, as she looks around at the world with a new perspective, as if seeing it for the first time. She then hears Shem calling for her, runs to him, and they immediately make love. Because this union results in two babies, twin girls, Shem, as the seed that creates these babies, represents the sefirot of Yesod, or foundation, which is the phallus through which divine energy becomes

manifest as Shekinah. The babies are, of course, Shekinah, God's presence made manifest in the created world.

The survival of these babies is not, however, guaranteed. When Noah discovers that Ila is pregnant, he vows to kill his grandchild immediately should it be born a girl, who might continue the human race. When Ila and Shem attempt to flee the boat, so that they may have their child in the open waters, without any guarantee of safety, yet protected from Noah, Noah burns their escape raft. The babies are therefore born on the ark, and the realization that they are both female brings renewed anguish and devastation to Ila, Shem, and Naameh, who, by this point, does not doubt Noah's resolve to follow through on what he has interpreted to be his divinely ordained mission: the destruction of humanity. When faced with the babies, the embodiment of God's presence in the world, however, Noah is unable to kill them. Poised to lower a knife upon their newborn bodies, he instead kisses their foreheads, leaving a traumatized and confused family in the wake of his murderous rampage.

It is unclear how much time elapses from this event until we finally get an explanation of Noah's actions (or inaction) in this scene. When the family reaches dry land, Noah continues to live separated from them. He isolates himself within a cave and gorges himself on wine. Following a scene that also appears in Genesis, where Ham and Shem cover up his naked body, which Ham gazes upon,⁹ he finds Ila sitting alone on a beach, and they talk. Here Noah reveals that in failing to kill the babies he has failed the Creator, since his mission, as he interpreted it, was to ensure the end of humanity. When Ila asks why he spared the babies, he explains that when he looked upon them, all he felt was love. You see, even Noah, who had managed to isolate himself completely from his family and

thus close himself off to the aspects of the divine they embody, was unable to deny the divine presence, or Shekinah, manifest in the babies.

It is Ila, who represents Tiferet, or beauty, the sefirot that emerges when judgment and mercy are balanced and that allows for God's prophetic energy to be manifest in the world, who helps explain Noah's real failure. She reminds Noah that, despite the fact that he received revelations from God, he maintained agency throughout his entire journey. Thus, the creator chose him for the mission knowing that he would exercise this agency. As previously indicated this agency was exercised every time that Noah collaborated with his family members in the film in his journey to interpret his visions and mission. It ended when he decided his mission was the end of humanity. Thus, as Ila indicates, the creator chose Noah for a reason.

He showed you the wickedness of man and knew you would not look away.
But you saw goodness, too. The choice was put in your hands because He
put it there. He asked you to decide if we were worth saving. And you chose
mercy. You chose love. (2:06:16-2:06:49)

Although, as we have argued in this paper, this choice came at the end of a long journey, started out on the wrong foot (without the illuminating Zohar and within the divine wisdom of the serpent), and included some fatal mistakes (like closing himself off from the divine attributes embodied by his family members), in the end, Noah's judgment, when faced with the divine presence manifest in the babies, was tempered by divine mercy.

This revelation (this time not in a vision, but from Ila, or tiferet- divine beauty), brings Noah to realize that he has not failed, and he once again rejoins his family, becoming open to loving and experiencing them once again. It is only then, when Noah once again enters the collaborative nexus of relationships with his family members, that the initial ritual involving the snakeskin is completed. In a scene reminiscent of the first, where

Lamech attempted to pass on the sacred birthright to Noah, but was interrupted; Noah now wraps the relic around his arm, it becomes luminous, and he touches each of his family member's outstretched hands with the end of the relic. Interestingly, although Ham is now absent, determining that there is no place for him with his family, he is named and blessed in this ritual. Thus, he is not cursed like he is in Genesis, but remains a part of the human family, even if he is not physically present.

Once this ritual is completed, we see another symbol that is familiar from the scriptural account of this story, the rainbow. In the film, however, is not a semi-circular rainbow, but an unbroken circle, which emanates out into creation. Particularly when we take into consideration the fact that each sefirot has a designated color, which together make a rainbow, this symbol indicates that Noah has finally (or once again), found his place in the world, and in a divine system that is characterized by balance and collaboration between divine attributes, embodied by his family members.

Conclusion/ Implications

Looking back on our journey of interpretation, it occurred to us that our journey involved mining the film, not unlike the mining for the Zohar Noah and his contemporaries are engaged in. We began by focusing on the violence of the film. From there, we investigated the possible Gnostic connections in the story, which led us to a more direct focus on Kabbalah. Where we ended up in our journey is by interpreting the film as a revelation of the inner life of the divine, embodied by Noah and his family members.

Kaballah is, however, a very ancient worldview. And Aronofsky's film is quite contemporary, coming out in 2014. The question remained, then, why would Aronofsky

choose (assuming we are correct in our analysis of the film), to produce such a mystical text, particularly if much of its meaning seems to be lost on the audience? Because each retelling of myth reflects the context in which it is told and communicated, how might this controversial and compelling film reflect contemporary concerns? What might it be trying to tell us?

Where we began our journey of interpretation, very much on the surface of the film, was with a positive response to the violence in the film. We welcomed this as an important representation to be considered alongside more childish representations of this story. Representing the story as a horrific one brings forth important questions about the nature and the justice of God, as well as the role of humanity in following divine orders. On the surface, Aronofsky gives us a story in which divinely ordained genocide is executed by a prophet who becomes isolated and deranged the more assured he becomes of God's will. As Moore and Ruah-Midbah Shapiro suggest, this can be seen as a warning against fundamentalist interpretations of scripture.²⁹ Noah becomes more and more violent, as he becomes surer of his own knowledge of God's will and refuses to hear other perspectives.

Connected with the issue of violence, our interpretation of the film as a Kabbalistic text, highlights the active role that human beings play in interpreting and enacting divine will, and the agency that they maintain. Our analysis suggests that it is only when Noah becomes assured of his own interpretation of divine will, and isolates himself from the experience of others (who, in this case, embody other aspects of the divine), that evil enters the picture. Evil (and violence) is therefore not the product of a divine commandment, but instead of the exclusion of the experience of others, particularly women such as Naameh, whom we believe represents divine mercy.

Taking a closer look at the role of gender in the film also reveals that women play an essential role in the story. It is Naameh who acts as divine mercy, and intercedes on behalf of her sons (and subsequently, on behalf of humanity and creation itself), when she appeals to Methuselah. Thus, although Naameh is just as sure of her own interpretation of divine will, she remains within the nexus of relationships that we claim is fundamental to the full experience of the divine, unlike Noah. As a result of this intercession, Ila gives birth to twin girls, ensuring the continuation of humanity. The central role played by these women reflects the central role they play in the Ein-Sof. Interestingly, however, Aronofsky has switched the genders of judgment (which is female in the Zohar) and mercy (which is male in the Zohar), thus maintaining a patriarchal interpretation of these attributes, according to which mercy is a feminine and maternal power, and judgment is a patriarchal male power. By representing Naameh and Ila as responsible for circumventing Noah's will, and ensuring the future of humanity, Aronofsky is not only critiquing the patriarchal construction of God, but also emphasizing the necessity of women's experience in understanding divine will and being. In addition, these women are solely responsible for countering the evil that enters the world when Noah closes himself off and exercises his power as the dominant male and divine judgment.

What Naameh, Ila, Noah, and everyone else have to tell us about our own role in the world, is both ancient kabbalistic knowledge and also a very contemporary and prescient message. It is simply that we, as Shekinah, are a part of the divine system. As the film demonstrates perfectly, God, and this system, are not, as often represented and understood, static and unchanging, but instead, dynamic. Kaballah maintains that when human beings live ethical lives, following the *mitzot* (or commandments), with the proper

intention and understanding, we have the power to redirect the flow of divine energy.³⁰ Thus, human beings have an active role to play in uniting the lowest sefirot with the highest, which, ultimately, brings about redemption. In other words, humans are active in interpreting and directing divine will and action in the world. We also have the potential, when we don't place ourselves within the human community, paying attention to the experiences and the suffering of others, especially those at the margins, to, like Noah, introduce evil into the world and thus destroy it.

This is ultimately why we have continually claimed that our interpretation of the film as a mystical text also makes it a subversive text. It compels us to think critically about the role that power plays in the story, in our reading of the story, and in the practical applications of the story in the world. Instead of compelling us to identify with Noah, the one in power, and thus seeing the divinely ordained genocide as justified, our interpretation suggests that Aronofsky may be calling us to hear the many other perspectives that are marginalized in the story, and consider how including them, for Noah, and for us, opens up new possibilities for interpreting the story, as well as experiencing the fullness of the divine.

¹ Matthew Jacobs, Darren Aronofsky Calls 'Noah' The 'Least Biblical Film Ever Made,' https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/darren-aronofsky-noah_n_4941318, accessed June 16, 2018.

² Setzer, Ed, "Noah: Five Negative Things About this Film, Dr. Jerry Johnson, President of the NRB, shares some negatives of the new Bible film, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/february/noah-five-negative-features-about-this-film.html>, accessed June 16, 2018. It's worth noting that a companion piece to this review, "Noah: Five Positive Things About this Film..." gives a more positive review, but also focuses on ways in which the film adapts the biblical text, either "taking [it] literally" or following its "basic plotline," <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/february/noah-five-positive-facts-about-this-film.html>, accessed June 16, 2018.

³ Kyle Buchanan, Let's talk about Noah's Crazy Giant Rock Monsters, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/03/noah-giant-rock-monsters.html>, accessed June 16, 2018.

⁴ Although we do not go into the origin and interpretation of these creatures in this paper, a fascinating analysis is found in “The Crimes of Love. The (Un)Censored Version of the Flood Story in Noah (2014)”, Wojciech Kosior. *Journal of Religion and Film* 20.3, article 29 (2016), available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1344&context=jrf>.

⁴ Kyle Smith, Aronofsky twists ‘Noah’ into Greenpeace worship, <https://nypost.com/2014/04/03/new-noah-twisted-into-environmentalist-parable/>, accessed June 16, 2018.

⁴ Robbie Collin, Darren Aronofsky Interview: The Noah Story is Scary, Telegraph, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/10739539/Darren-Aronofsky-interview-The-Noah-story-is-scary.html>, accessed June 18, 2018.

⁵ Michael L. Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice* (New York; Columbia University Press, 2006). 126-7.

⁶ An excellent example of contemporary feminist midrash is Alicia Jo Rabins musical album, *Girls in Trouble*, which includes various songs retelling the stories of the Tanak from the point of view of women, including Eve, Sarah, and Lilith. <https://jwa.org/teach/girlsintrouble>

⁷ For more on the nature of Midrash and its role in this film, see Lila Moore and Marianna Ruah-Midbah Shapiro’s piece, “Humanity’s Second Chance: Darren Aronofsky’s Noah (2014) as an Environmental Cinematic Midrash”. *Journal of Religion and Film* 22.1, article 35, available at <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1639&context=jrf>

⁸ Dr. Brian Mattson, “Sympathy for the Devil,” March 31, 2014, <http://drbrianmattson.com/journal/2014/3/31/sympathy-for-the-devil> Accessed June 23, 2018.

⁹ Nicola Denzey Lewis, *Introduction to “Gnosticism”: Ancient Voices, Christian Worlds* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 118-119.

¹⁰ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 6th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2016), 208-210.

¹¹ Peter T. Chattaway, “No *Noah* is not Gnostic (Say that ten times fast!),” April 1, 2014, *Patheos*, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/filmchat/2014/04/no-noah-is-not-gnostic-say-that-ten-times-fast.html>, accessed June 22, 2018.

¹² Brian Mattson, “I respond to a few critics,” April 1, 2014, <http://drbrianmattson.com/journal/2014/4/1/i-respond-to-a-few-critics>, accessed June 23, 2018.

¹³ Chattaway, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/filmchat/2014/04/no-noah-is-not-gnostic-say-that-ten-times-fast.html>, accessed June 22, 2018.

¹⁴ Notable among these is Lila Moore and Marianna Ruah-Midbah Shapiro’s piece, “Humanity’s Second Chance: Darren Aronofsky’s Noah (2014) as an Environmental Cinematic Midrash.” Fascinatingly, Aronofsky’s website, Protozoa Pictures, which includes a link for each of his films, brings those who select Noah to an eighty page papal encyclical by Pope Francis, entitled, *On Care for Our Common Home*. <http://protozoa.com/>, accessed June 23, 2018.

¹⁵ Chattaway, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/filmchat/2014/04/no-noah-is-not-gnostic-say-that-ten-times-fast.html>, accessed June 22, 2018.

¹⁶ Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1995), 6.

¹⁷ Michael L. Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*, 238.

¹⁸ Ibid., 238-241.

¹⁹ It should also be noted that this practice of wrapping around one's arm is similar to the Jewish practice of wrapping the tefilin, leather boxes containing passages from exodus and Deuteronomy, which are attached using long leather straps. Alfred J. Kolacht, *The Jewish Book of Why* (NY: Penguin Compass Books, 2000) 104-6.

²⁰ In addition, as we will demonstrate in the following section, within Jewish mystical theology, there is no independent force that exists, whether good or evil, which is located outside of the divine. Therefore, the serpent, as with everything and everyone else in the garden, is part of God

²¹ In "The Crimes of Love. The (Un)Censored Version of the Flood Story in Noah (2014), Wojciech Kosior comments that "the cast's costumes retained a design that would fit a post-apocalyptic fiction rather than a biblical epic."

²² Our use of the language of "inner lives" here is meant to allude to the relationship between the Zohar and the Torah, where the former reveals the "inner life" of God that is hidden in the stories of Torah. Our argument in this article suggests the film, in revealing the "inner lives" of these characters, is, in the same way, also revealing the inner life of God.

²³ For a fascinating analysis on the character of Naameh in Midrash and the Zohar, see Kosior's "The Crimes of Love. The (Un)Censored Version of the Flood Story in Noah (2014)".

²⁴ Ibid., xxi-xxiv.

²⁵ Satlow, *Creating Judaism*, 233.

²⁶ Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kaballah*, 8.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Satlow, 236.

⁹ As indicated by Kosior, this is often understood as Sodomy rather than simply Ham looking upon his father's naked body. "The Crimes of Love. The (Un)Censored Version of the Flood Story in Noah (2014)," 15-16.

²⁹ Notable among these is Lila Moore and Marianna Ruah-Midbah Shapiro's piece, "Humanity's Second Chance: Darren Aronofsky's Noah (2014) as an Environmental Cinematic Midrash."

³⁰ Satlow, 239.

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